Why the Big Corporation Chose a Girl to be Its Chief

The Amazing Story of a Stenographer Who Learned to Run Her Employer's Factories by Studying the Meaning of Letters He Dictated Daily and Became the Head of the Business---Only 29, and Still Enjoys Dancing Despite Her Responsibilities

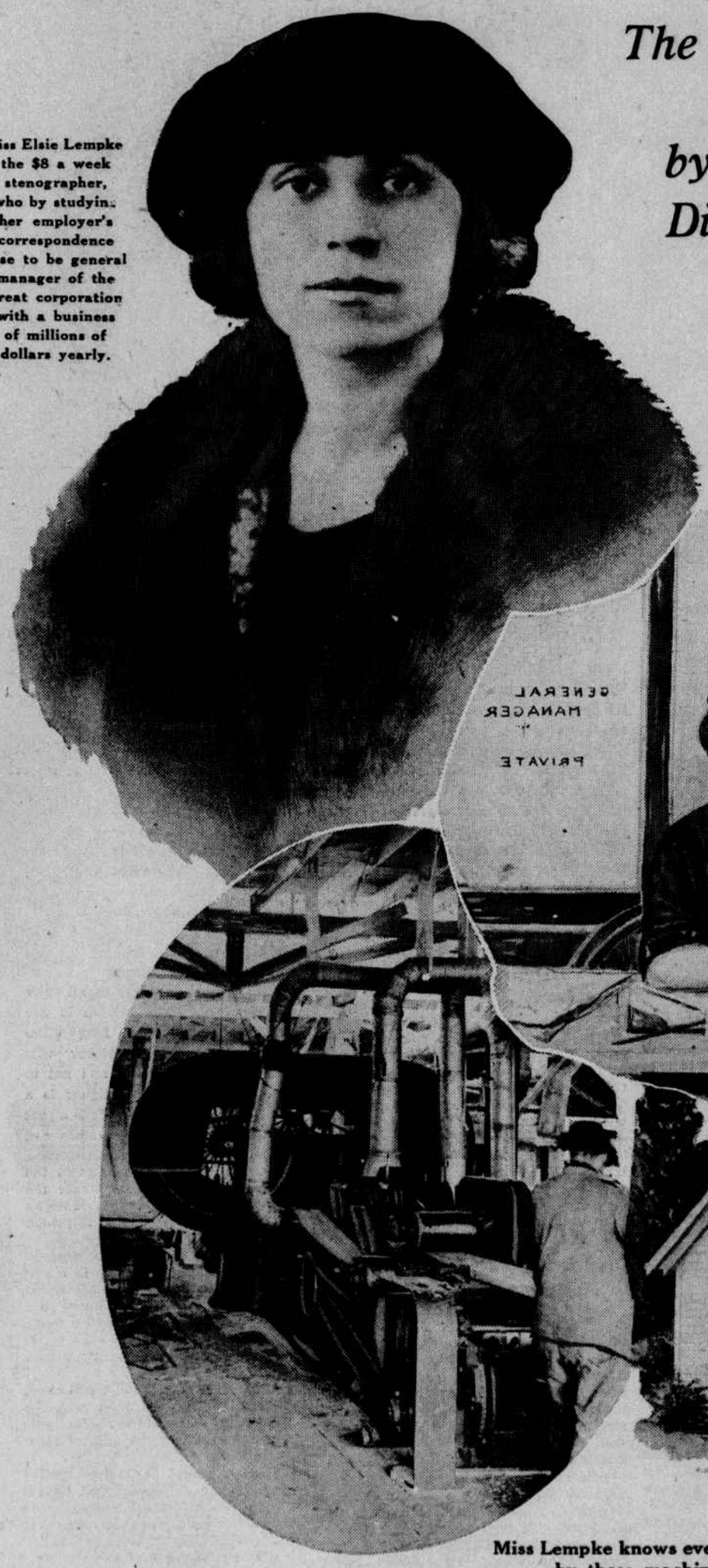
A FEW weeks ago a brief bulletin was posted in the several branch factories and departments of a great industrial corporation, employing several hundred men and women and engaged in a highly specialized business which sends its product into almost every corner of the United States. It was a bulletin that attracted considerable attention among the employees as well as among the minor officials and superintendents of the company.

It was in form a notification that a new general manager had been elected by the directors of the company, and that hereafter all executive orders and all changes in the routine of the company's great plants must be signed by her.

It was that one short word "her" that, of course, caused the most of the astonishment.

It seemed wholly preposterous that a woman should be put at the head of one of the nation's large businesses, having in her hands the direction of a specialized force of experts and directing a business which involved many millions of dollars annually.

There was still a deeper shock due those who were interested in the bulletin. It proved that the woman thus set apart to control the destinies of the company was not by any means as old as the least important of the company's other and lesser executive. It was soon discovered that she was, in fact, but twenty-nine years old. And she was neither stern nor freakish—as might have been expected. She proved to be a most simple, wholesome young woman, exceedingly attractive, given to smiles and frills and known to be deft at all the more conservative dance steps.



Miss Elsie Lempke the $8 a week stenographer, who by studying her employer's correspondence rose to be general manager of the great corporation with a business of millions of dollars yearly.

Workers Are Amazed By Girl's Rapid Rise

And then, when other information came along and percolated down through the great mills, emanating, of course, from the office boys at headquarters and passing then through superintendents down to apprentices, it was further learned that the new "G. M." had worked her way to the top; that she had begun a few years ago as a very young girl with the most humble employees and had by the sheer forcefulness of her determination forced her way into the general manager's chair.

The factory workers have since learned, even in the few days that have passed, that their new general manager typifies a very human and altogether startling story of success.

Her name is Elsie Lempke. Her firm is the Aladdin Company, operators of great lumber and building mills, in which complete houses are constructed for shipment in parts. It is a business requiring the most expert knowledge, its volume amounting, as has been said above, to many millions every year.

So far as is known Miss Lempke is the only woman holding such a position in the United States. Others may be at the head of smaller businesses or may play important parts in companies as large, but none of whom is there ready record as holding such power in so great an organization and one requiring of its executive director as much technical knowledge of its business.

Miss Lempke was not a college girl, unless a short term, which she managed somehow to pay for, in a small and humble "business college" might thus classify her. Quitting her public school as soon as she was old enough, she found a way to have a term or two in the business school, where she learned shorthand and typewriting.

"I remember," said Miss Lempke to her business associates recently, "that I was determined even then to get as much money together as I could as soon as I could. My particular reason is rather vague now, but it was a good one to me then. I did not, however, spend my avaricious thoughts on my weekly salary as it was then doled out to me. I thought mostly of getting ahead so I could earn fabulous sums—I even dreamed I might, if I should work unusually hard, some day have my weekly envelope fattened to the extent of fifteen dollars each week. There was an awe inspiring tradition around the office in which I first went to work that there once had been a young woman in that office so expert and efficient that she actually reached that dizzy height—fifteen dollars a week.

"I wondered how she had accomplished it, and to appease my curiosity I began to do more than transcribe my employer's letters. I began to really read them. For a long time the most of them were Greek to me, of course, but eventually I hit upon the plan of first reading the letter to the boss, which he would hand me as a guide to the address to write upon the answer, and then I would carefully read his reply after I had typed it. If I could not understand I would wait until another letter came along from the same source and result in another reply. Then I would get the old copies out of the files and refresh my mind upon the first correspondence and study the later letters.

"Before long, of course, I began to understand the sometimes cryptic sentences of the boss. I could almost tell in advance just what he would write in answer to a given letter. I caught myself one day giving vent to an exclamation of disapproval when I caught, in taking down my shorthand notes, the boss giving a prospective customer a promise that certain goods that had been ordered would be shipped him within a certain time. Almost unconsciously it came to my mind, even as I took down the dictation, that only three days before my boss had written another customer that he could not accept an order for these same goods, explaining that certain supplies were not available and would not be for three months or more.

"I was sure my employer, who was absent minded at times, had forgotten, so I started to say something, caught myself and meekly subsided. But my employer had heard and seen me and was curious.

"'What was that you were about to say?' he asked sharply.

"'I hope you will pardon me—but I remembered you had written only a few days ago to Mr. So-and-So that the materials for the making of those goods would not be available for three months. I was not thinking and allowed myself to be surprised when you promised Mr. So-and-So in this letter to-day that he could have his goods immediately.'

"'Ahem,' said the boss, 'change that last sentence to read—I am sorry, &c.'

"Somehow my employer remembered and, I suppose, began gradually to take advantage of information I stored up. I really began to learn the business just by making myself—I had to force myself sometimes—become acquainted with the meaning and import of every paper that passed through my hands."

Miss Lempke knows every detail of the work done by these machines and can manage every other detail in her big factories—One of the homes which Miss Lempke designed and which is one of the many her company sends around the world.

But Miss Lempke did not, it seems, reach the ambitious goal she had outlined for herself—the fifteen dollars a week.

"A prophet is not without honor except in his own country," she quotes at the remembrance. She did find a dollar a week more in her envelope a few times in sequence, but even then the total of fifteen had not been achieved.

But there was another factory of the same kind not far away. It was larger, employed more stenographers, and, it was rumored, actually paid two of its young women typists not only fifteen dollars a week, but a full eighteen.

Miss Lempke believed she understood enough now of the lumber business—both factories were lumber mills—to go marketing for a larger field. She had begun to make both ends meet and was somewhat confident. She was given the other position and began all over again learning her new employer's business by thoroughly reading and understanding every document that came to her. She was at first engaged in copying orders and typing the brief directions one of the executives attached to each.

She acquired the habit of reading the lumber trade bulletins that came to the office in the mails and watched the fluctuations of prices as appearing in the orders she handled. She sought diligently for reasons for these fluctuations in the trade reports. She wondered why spruce was more expensive than pine, and sought books that would explain in detail about the peculiarities of spruce and pine and reveal market conditions concerning them.

In the manner of a teacher giving lessons to a class, she began to set for herself the task of each day watching the trade reports and bulletins and predicting the price changes which would appear in the dictated letters and reports of her employers the next day. She considered herself as being "bad at her lessons" when she could not predict the fluctuations almost exactly. She was always willing to help out the other girls in the office by writing some of their letters when they needed such assistance—she wanted to read those letters of the other bosses just to see what they wrote about and to detect any new subjects for examination.

"I was not making any glorious attempt to be efficient so as to be more worthy of my salary," Miss Lempke explains. "That really never occurred to me. I was always satisfied with the salary I was earning, except that I wanted to get ahead—just for the satisfaction, I suppose. I wasn't in any particularly self-pride state of mind; it just seemed to me that every one of those who were higher up must have had some opportunity to learn and had taken advantage of that chance and had profited by it. I wanted to profit and was determined I wouldn't stay a stenographer—I wanted the things that stenographers couldn't afford or couldn't aspire to."

Inevitably a little thing brought the certain reward. Young Miss Lempke's immediate superior one morning, with considerable formality, in the manner of a man intrusting a great responsibility and desirous of fully impressing that person with the magnitude of the trust, suggested to her that she run through the morning's mail by herself and sort out such letters as she, because of her several months' experience in the office, might answer without troubling him. He meant, of course, that she should winnow out the unimportant letters to which mere polite acknowledgment were due or the letters asking the usual inconsequential questions which could be answered in quite stereotyped fashion.

"And bring your original letters and your replies to me," concluded the executive, "so I may see how you succeed and decide how far you may be trusted to use your own initiative."

A few hours later, when he thought of the matter, the executive called his typist and asked her how many of the letters she had been able to answer.

"All of them, sir," was Miss Lempke's astonishing reply.

He was incredulous, of course. In fact, he was little perturbed by the presumption of this typist. He intended probably to speak sharply upon the subject of a typist going too far. But when he had read the last of the typist's replies, some of them to letters involving factory orders running into thousands of dollars, others dealing in trade matters of the most technical character, he was astonished.

"Why, Miss Lempke, every letter is just what I would have written myself. One or two are distinctly better."

Of course she found her envelope fattened to the full extent of the spectacular eighteen dollars at the end of that week.

But that, after all, was just the beginning.

There were eighty other girl typists in the office of that factory. Some had been there years. Miss Lempke had been there two months when the above incident occurred. In another two months she was called into the office of the president of the company. The president pointed to a little private office adjoining that of his own.

"That is the office of my private secretary, Miss Lempke," the president said. "If you wish you may go in there and make yourself at home."

"I do not think I shall ever forget," says Miss Lempke, "the magic feel of that rich, mahogany desk! On the floor was just an office rug, but it seemed that my feet were treading the deep soft nap of the genii's flying carpet. I tumbled down into the swivel chair and whirled myself around, feet stuck out so far I cracked my ankles against the desk as the chair swung around. And I said to myself, out loud—Private Secretary to the President."

One may sympathize with the typist so suddenly promoted from among eighty other girls, most of them employees longer than she.

The president learned to lean heavily upon his new private secretary. He began to find that most of the information about his business that he usually had to send out to minor executives to get he could receive direct from Miss Lempke. The president of the Aladdin company himself says:

"I soon found that whatever I left to my secretary to do she did just as well as I could have done it myself. I never intended to leave to her anything of an executive nature. But within a few months I discovered that I was having just about one-tenth of my usual work to do and that Miss Lempke was doing the other nine-tenths. I don't know how the process worked itself out. It seemed quite natural, after a while, to leave to her decisions and plans which, at one time, would have kept me at the office half the night."

The superintendent of the largest of the Aladdin plants—at Wilmington—sums up the abilities of Miss Lempke when he says:

"When she first came to this plant on a visit I soon discovered that, although she had never seen the works, she could receive a carload of lumber at the back door of the plant and guide it through every machine in the buildings—call every saw by its right name, and adjust every plane to the proper fraction of a hundredth of an inch, and carry it through until that original lumber went out the front door a complete five room house. And she could certify to the company's guarantee that nowhere in that house could be found a knot hole."

The private secretary's first promotion came as dramatically as had the promotion of the typist. The president asked her if she ever had been far from Bay City (Mich.), the home of the executive offices. She had not.

Sent to Florida to Take Charge There

"Then you would enjoy a trip to Tampa, Florida—go down there and be general manager of the company's offices there."

The Florida offices were sales headquarters for the South. As sales manager Miss Lempke almost doubled the business in that territory.

It was from Florida Miss Lempke recently was called to Bay City to be notified of her election by the directors to be the general manager of the entire company, with her own executive headquarters in North Carolina.

"She was chosen," the president explains, "because she knows more about the business in all its various phases than any other person. She can step into the shoes of any workman in the plants, or into the position of any executive, and perform whatever part of the company's business or labors might come to her. Many of the features of our house were designed by her, and she can tell to the fraction of an inch, off hand, just how many square feet of lumber, what kind and quality, and at what cost price, are included in any sized house we build. She knows the details of every department. And she knows better how to run any branch of the business than any man within our ken."

Yet Miss Lempke is only 29! And it was such a short time ago that she was taking dictation at less than eight dollars a week that she still thinks in shorthand.

There are no softnesses in her office; no flowers, pillows or ribbons. Yet, seeing her as she rises from her desk, without visioning at once the office environment, one might well think her a debutante hostess welcoming a caller to afternoon tea.

"It all seems to me," she says, with something of a wistful smile, "as it would have seemed a little while ago if my boss had suddenly jumped me from that eight dollars a week to the enormous fifteen."